

Bread salad an appetizing introduction to Tunisian cuisine

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SPECIAL WRITER

Blankit is an easy canapé, a kind of succulent Tunisian bruschetta. Perfect in warm weather, it is a slice of French bread heaped with the finely chopped salad of tomato, green pepper and radish or fennel. A wedge of hard-cooked egg or some moist, dark tuna is often perched on top of the Blankit.

The French, who once ruled Tunisia, left behind in this North African country an enduring love for their crusty bread. In Blankit, which actually refers to the cushion of bread itself, the cottony center of the local version of French bread soaks up and holds the juices of the vegetable topping. Because of this, you must eat Blankit shortly after it is made or risk having the whole thing fall into a delicious mess in your hand.

A better way to avoid this is by serving Blankit as an appetizer, eaten with a knife and fork. And still better way is to turn the Blankit into a bread salad.

Visiting Tunisia recently, I enjoyed Blankit served this way. It was the first course at a lunch served by the Maouia family at Dar Maouia, their home in the medina, the once-walled old quarter of Tunis.

The Maouia sisters, our hosts, were exceptional cooks, even in

this country where women are the most respected chefs. Their family recipe for Blankit combined cubes of soft French bread with the expected chopped vegetables, plus finely diced Swiss cheese, chopped parsley, olives and anchovy, and flaked tuna. This was dressed with fruity olive oil and a splash of wine vinegar, and served on a bed of Romaine lettuce leaves, ringed with wedges of hard-cooked egg.

Though Tunisian cooking is little known in the U.S., you can easily get all the ingredients for this salad, making it an easy as well as an appealing introduction to the splendid flavors of this North African cuisine.

BLANKIT: TUNISIAN BREAD SALAD

- 1 large green bell pepper
- 10-inch length French bread, stored overnight in a plastic bag
- 4 large plum tomatoes, seeded and diced (1 cup)
- 2 ounces low-fat Swiss cheese, cut in 1/2-inch cubes (1/2 cup)
- 2-ounce can anchovy filets, rinsed and chopped
- 1/4 cup Sicilian-style green olives, chopped
- 1 tablespoon capers, rinsed and chopped
- 1/2 cup chopped Italian parsley

- 1/2 cup chopped mint
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Romaine lettuce leaves

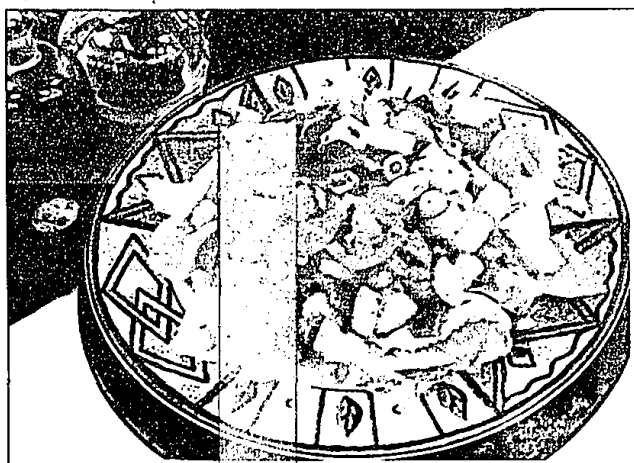
Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Place the pepper on a piece of foil in the center of the oven. Roast 20 minutes, until its skin is dark in spots and loose.

Immediately place the pepper in a paper bag for 20 minutes. Using your fingers, peel the pepper. Seed the pepper and chop it finely.

Cut the bread into 1/2-inch slices. Halve each slice horizontally, then stack and cut the halves into 1/2-inch pieces. Place the cubed bread in a large bowl; there should be 4 cups.

To the cubed bread, add the green pepper, tomato, cheese, anchovies, olives, and capers. Toss to combine. Add the parsley and mint, and toss four in the oil and vinegar, and toss until the bread is completely moistened; it will reduce in volume. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Arrange the lettuce to make a bed on each of 4 dinner plates, then mound 2 cups of the salad on each. Serve immediately.

Nutrition information: each of the four servings contains 238 calories and 8 grams of fat.



Splendid salad: Though Tunisian cooking is little known in the U.S., you can easily get all the ingredients for this bread salad.

Dana Jacobi, is author of "The Best of Clay Pot Cooking" and

"The Natural Kitchen: SOY!"

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Beef is a favorite with many Americans

May is Beef Month in Michigan. According to the Michigan Beef Industry Commission, beef has been a main component of American diets for centuries. Nearly nine out of ten households in the U.S. will serve beef in the next two weeks.

"Beef is a nutritional bargain," said Kathleen Hawkins, executive director of the Michigan Beef Industry Commission. "Our producers have been responsive to consumer demands for leaner beef at a good value. Today's beef has 27 percent less trimmable fat than just a decade ago and beef has significant amounts of important nutrients like iron, zinc, protein and the B-vitamins."

American consumers are expected to consume more than 55.8 million pounds of beef this Memorial Day. Remember to use an instant-read thermometer to safeguard against foodborne bacteria when preparing beef.

A study commissioned by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association found that only two per-

cent of Americans say they regularly use an instant-read thermometer to determine the proper doneness of beef. Of those who do use an instant-read thermometer, less than half they use an instant-read thermometer every time. More than half said they do not use instant-read thermometers because "they never thought of it."

The best way to know the internal temperature of beef or poultry is to use an instant-read thermometer to ensure that it is cooked to the proper temperature.

Ground beef should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160°F. Steak and roasts to 145°F. Reheat leftovers to at least 160°F. When cooking chicken, the thermometer should read 180°F.

For more information about beef and food safety on the Web, visit www.beef.org, www.MIBeef.org, or www.fight-bac.org.

To receive "Plating It Safe" and "Fight BAC!" food safety

brochures, call (888)-SAFTIPS

Thai-Style Steak Pizza is one of the recipes you'll find in "America's Favorite Beef Recipes" (Time-Life, Inc. 1998). The bold flavor of beef pairs perfectly with the assertive flavors of indigenous to Thai cuisine.

Packed with 77 delicious recipes this cookbook was created by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

THAI-STYLE STEAK PIZZA

Total preparation and cooking time: 30 minutes

- 1 1/4 pound boneless beef top sirloin steak, cut 1 inch thick

- 1 tablespoon roasted garlic oil

- 1/4 cup sliced green onions

- 1 package (10 ounces) pre-baked thin pizza crust (12-inch diameter)

- 3 tablespoons Thai peanut sauce

- 1 1/2 cups (6 ounces) shredded pizza cheese blend
- 1/2 cup packaged shredded

carrots

- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro

Heat oven to 425°F. Cut beef steak lengthwise in half, then crosswise into 1/4-inch thick strips. In large nonstick skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat until hot. Stir-fry beef and onions in 2 batches, 2 to 3 minutes each, or until outside surface of beef is no longer pink. Remove from skillet with slotted spoon.

Place pizza crust on ungreased large baking sheet. Spread with peanut sauce; sprinkle with 1/2 cup of cheese. Top with beef mixture; sprinkle with remaining 1 cup of cheese.

Bake in 425°F oven 11 to 13 minutes or until cheese is melted. Sprinkle with carrots and cilantro. Cut into 8 wedges. Serve immediately. Makes 1 pizza, 8 wedges.

Nutrition information per wedge: 266 calories; 23g protein; 18g carbohydrate; 11g fat; 2.7mg iron; 429mg sodium; 53mg cholesterol.



NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

Delicious and easy: Thai-Style Steak Pizza is but one of the classic and contemporary favorites from the new cookbook, "America's Favorite Beef Recipes."

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